

Striving for Perfection **Philippians 3: 4b – 14**

(preached October 8, 2023)

Are you a perfectionist? If you play an instrument, do you practice morning, noon, and night till every note is right? If you're a gardener, do you prune and pull up weeds till every plant is thriving? In the kitchen, do you stir and whisk till you can serve the most delicious dish? You know, if you strive for perfection, it can be satisfying to do something very well.

These days, a lot of us strive for perfection. Speaking for myself, I'd say that my particular striving is a quest for perfect grammar. I proofread every piece of writing, making sure there are no run on sentences or fragments. I don't tolerate dangling participles or misplaced prepositions. Even now, when our computers can correct our grammar, I insist on checking everything myself. I don't think I'm all that different from the rest of us. We don't all strive for perfect grammar, of course, but many of us have that drive for perfection.

At the beginning of our passage for today, from his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul admits that he's been striving for perfection all his life. He describes his background. In a contemporary translation of the Bible called *The Message*, Eugene Peterson translates his words this way, "You know my pedigree: ...an Israelite from the elite tribe of Benjamin; a strict and devout adherent to God's law; a fiery defender of the purity of my religion;...a meticulous observer of everything in God's law book."

Paul's credentials are impressive. Today, it would be like someone saying, "My ancestors came over on the Mayflower; I attended an Ivy League university. My grade point average was 4.0. After graduation, I was hired by one of the top 10 companies in the country." Paul had that kind of background, and drive for perfection. He devoted himself to achieving it.

But he tells the Philippians, now that he knows Jesus Christ, everything has changed. No longer does he look to human standards of perfection. He says, again in Peterson's translation, "I consider that a bunch of garbage! Everything I once thought I had going for me I've thrown into the trash. All my accomplishments don't amount to a hill of beans... compared to knowing Christ, everything else is insignificant."

Paul had once followed religious laws to the letter. He was also a fervent persecutor of Christians. But one day, as he travels on the road to Damascus, he encounters the risen Christ. In the brilliant light of Christ, he experiences the love of God. The love of God that Paul experiences transcends all religious laws. That love transcends all human achievements. That encounter on the road to Damascus changes Paul's life completely. Now he travels all over the eastern Mediterranean region, telling people of the loving God he has found in Christ. He tells them in person, and he tells them in letters that were read aloud to communities of Christians, like the new church in Philippi.

The new church in Philippi was made up of all sorts of people. People from different social classes, some of Asian background, some Greek. Some of them had grown up pagans, worshiping Roman gods; some had been Jews. When he wrote his letter, Paul was concerned about the way they were practicing their faith. Their leaders were very legalistic. Those leaders insisted that new believers had to work their way into God's graces by adhering rigorously to the law. They had to earn favor with God by dotting the i's and crossing the t's of every law. They had to become the most fervent followers of God's law they could be. They had to strive for perfection by human standards.

Paul takes issue with this. He has no use for human standards of achievement. For him, following Jesus is not some kind of striving for perfection. He knows that he can never achieve perfection, no matter how hard he tries to follow each law to the letter. But none of that matters because now he knows Christ, and the love of God made known in him. For Paul, knowing Christ is not something to be achieved by striving for perfection. It's something to be received, by believing in God's love in Christ. It's a gift to be received by opening himself to Christ and letting Christ work within him.

The same can be true for you and me. Knowing God's love in Christ is not an achievement we have to strive for. It's something we simply open ourselves to receive. God's love is a love that wants to work in us, to transform our hearts and lives. Christ wants to call forth from each of us the person God created us to be, with the very first breath we took. When we receive this love, when we open ourselves to him, Christ can work within us. He can help us live to the fullest the lives that God intends for us.

When Christ goes to work within us, it's a little like the way the artist Michelangelo described his work of sculpture. The story is told that Michelangelo once saw a lump of marble in a builder's yard. The lump of marble was nothing

much to look at. It was stained and misshapen. Obviously it had been rejected by the builders and cast aside.

But Michelangelo insisted that the lump of marble be taken to his studio. He said, “There’s an angel imprisoned in that marble and I can set it free!” (Leslie Weatherhead, quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 30, no. 4, p. 8). In a similar way, Christ can see in each of us the person God created us to be. When we open ourselves to him, Christ can work within us. Christ can set us free to become that person. No matter how many rough edges we have, no matter how many scars we bear, no matter how full of faults we are, Christ sees in us the beautiful person God made. Christ wants to work within us, so we can become the work of art God created us to be.

If we receive him and let him know us, he strokes and chisels and polishes. In a thousand little ways, he shapes us. His hands free us, not to achieve human standards of perfection, but to live joyfully as beloved children of God. He frees us for the lives for which God created us; lives that shine with God’s holy purpose.

In closing, I’d like to share with you some words from the hymn, “At the Name of Jesus,” found in the *Pilgrim Hymnal* (#197). Using the language of her day, the nineteenth century, Caroline M. Noel describes beautifully what Jesus does when we open our hearts to him:

In your hearts enthrone him; there let him subdue
 All that is not holy, all that is not true;
 Crown him as your captain in temptation’s hour;
 Let his will enfold you in its light and power.

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 Pentecost 19